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FACT SHEET

January 2011

Youth Courts

The first youth court programs grew out of efforts by the American Bar Association and other national and community organizations to hold youth accountable for their actions before they develop a pattern of law-breaking behavior. Youth courts began in Odessa, Texas, in the early 1980s and eventually arrived in California's Humboldt and Contra Costa Counties in the mid- to late-1980s. Youth courts are also known as peer courts, teen courts, and student courts. According to statistics from the U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), there were 78 youth courts in 1994, and there are now approximately 1,400 youth courts in 49 states.

What Are Youth Courts?

Youth court, also known as peer, teen, or student court, is an alternative approach to the traditional juvenile justice system. Youth court provides real consequences for first-time juvenile offenders and involves teen volunteers and former defendants in the court process. A youth charged with an offense opts to forego the hearing and sentencing procedures of the juvenile courts and agrees to a sentencing forum with a jury of the youth's peers—other teens who have been trained to assume various roles, including those of attorneys, court staff, and, most importantly, jurors who determine the fate of the offenders. Juvenile offenders who participate in the youth court program avoid a criminal record while still being held accountable for their actions. Youth courts are youth focused and driven and are designed and operated to empower youth.

The target population is teens arrested on misdemeanor charges and some minor felonies—anything from graffiti writing to small-time drug sales. These courts usually handle nonviolent first-time defendants accused of shoplifting, vandalism, starting schoolyard fights, and committing crimes unlikely to be prosecuted otherwise.

Youth courts allow teens to hold each other accountable for their illegal actions and reduce the likelihood that teens will engage in delinquent behavior. Teens and parents, who are required to be involved in their teen's intake session and court

"Teen Court puts an end to the 'revolving door' and empowers our young people to take responsibility for their actions and the actions of their peers."

*—Hon. Thomas R. Adams,
Judge of the Superior Court
of Santa Barbara County*

hearings, get exposure to the judicial process and are likely to realize the importance of being proactive in making changes in their lives.



Benefits of Youth Court

Although research on youth courts is still emerging, individual research conducted on youth court programs across the nation has found outcomes at least as positive as other diversionary alternatives and some that were superior to other alternatives. Recent studies show that youth court participation produces the following benefits:

- *Accountability:* Youth court helps ensure that juvenile offenders are held accountable for their illegal behavior, even when their offenses are relatively minor and would not likely result in sanctions from the traditional juvenile justice system.
- *Timeliness:* An effective youth court can move juvenile offenders from arrest to sanctions within a few days rather than the months that may pass with traditional juvenile courts. This expedited response may increase the positive impact of court sanctions, regardless of their severity.
- *Cost savings:* Youth court is a cost-effective alternative to traditional juvenile court for some young offenders because youth court workers are volunteers, and because participation in youth court reduces recidivism. If managed properly, a youth court may handle a substantial number of offenders at relatively little cost to the community.
- *Community connection:* A successful youth court may affect the entire community by increasing public appreciation of the legal system, enhancing community-court relationships, encouraging greater respect for the law among youth, and promoting volunteerism among both adults and youth.
- *Youth influence youth:* Teens respond better to prosocial peers than to adult authority figures; hence, they react positively to the youth court program. Youth court provides young people with avenues for positive development and personal success. Youth volunteers learn from each other and gain a deeper understanding of the legal system.
- *Prevention:* Youth courts prevent further delinquent acts by empowering and educating youth.

Youth Court Resources

Desktop Guide Provides Key Information on Cases Handled by Youth Courts:

The [American Bar Association](#)  (ABA) and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) have announced the release of [Youth Cases for Youth Courts: A Guide to the Typical Offenses Handled by Youth Courts](#) . Published by the ABA with funding from OJJDP and others, this desktop guide provides community leaders with helpful information that equips them to address questions critical to the effective implementation of youth courts.

For additional information, see:

[National Association of Youth Courts](#) 

[Placer County Peer Court](#) 

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